Chapter 1
"Queer English" and "Heteronormative German":
Negotiating Linguistic Repertoires and Identity in a Queer Activist Context in Berlin

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores linguistic identity construction by L2 speakers in a multilingual context. It is based on an ethnographic field study about the indexical use of English in a queer community of practice (CofP), a queer activist group in Berlin. The chapter analyzes ethnographic interview data with members of the group, focusing on metapragmatic and metadiscursive statements. The main result is that in the group context, English and German are juxtaposed alongside a "queer" versus "heteronormative" dichotomy, leading to the use of English as constitutive of the members' and the group's cosmopolitan queer identity. More generally, the chapter combines 3rd wave variationist perspectives on linguistic indexicality with a contemporary approach to multilingualism and language contact and emphasizes the importance of including L2 speakers to the study of multilingualism and linguistic identity production in order to fully account for the plurality of multilingual experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before our interview, Chris had attended a queer-feminist demonstration in Berlin. It was March 8th, International Women's Day. As a queer activist, participating in queer and feminist protests is part of Chris's daily life. This time, however, something was off. During the speeches, they realized that the only German speech in a series of otherwise English-language contributions was translated into English. The other contributions, on the other hand, were not translated into German. While Chris's first language is German, understanding, speaking, and chanting English is not an issue: They study English

at university, lived in England for a few months during high school, and have plans to work and study abroad in New Zealand and Canada over the next couple of years. The fact that the organizers of the demonstration seemed to assume that all participants understand English, but not German, would probably not even have occurred to Chris if they hadn't happened to be at the demo with two friends who are not part of their political collective, and who feel significantly less comfortable speaking English than their first language German. In Chris's friend group, these two friends are somewhat exceptional. English, a language which Chris and most people they know had first learned in high school, is a central repertoire for their everyday social and political life.

English competence is a highly valued resource in Berlin. The growing presence of the language is a consequence of a series of national policies in the Federal Republic of Germany after WW2 and urban policies in the reunited Berlin after 1989. As Heyd and Schneider suggest, four groups contribute to the visibility of English in the German capital: educated upwardly mobile native German speakers, tourists and the tourist-based industry, hypermobile wealthy, mostly white expats and refugees and more precarious migrants (Heyd & Schneider, 2019, 149–150). The wealthy expats in particular have received much public and media attention in the last decades. Through the marketing of Berlin as a hip and artsy "place to be" in the post-reunification era (Farrell, 2019) and, more recently, as a start-up location and destination for so-called digital nomads, the presence of English has been synonymous with the gentrification of the city and the displacement of underprivileged communities and communities of color (Baines, 2015; Malmgren, 2011; Mendoza, 2011). As such, English in Berlin has been met with skepticism from both conservative (Spahn, 2017) and leftist voices (Hilal & Varatharajah, 2022). In the meantime, the diverse linguistic practices of the first group of English speakers identified by Heyd and Schneider—and the group that best describes Chris and their friends: upwardly mobile L1 German speakers—have received little media and scholarly attention until now.

This chapter is concerned with the role of English in the identity construction of queer L1 German and L2 English speakers[1] in Berlin. It is based on an ethnographic field study conducted in 2021–2022 with members of a community of practice (CofP) (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992), a queer political collective which operates in English. Drawing on qualitative interviews with members of the CofP, it explores identity-based motivations for repertoire management and the semiotic processes of language ideology that underlie these motivations. In order to determine the semiotic aspects of English use in the participants' identity construction, the study is primarily concerned with their metapragmatic reflections on the use of English and German. The discussion focuses on the opposing indexical meanings of English usage in and outside of the group and on the affective dimension of L2 usage in identity construction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Repertoire, Code-Switching, and Repertoire Management

Associated with early ethnographic research in sociolinguistics, the term *repertoire* denotes "the totality of linguistic resources […] available to members of particular communities" (Gumperz, 1972, 20–21). Thus, the notion refers to an individual's linguistic experience and expertise constituted by linguistic features and resources from a broad range of varieties, languages, and linguistic practices. Alternating between subsystems of the linguistic repertoire (sociolects, dialects, or languages) is commonly referred to as 'code-switching'. The mechanisms of code-switching, in turn, are determined by the context of the

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